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S/P FOR GBEHRMAN, R FOR SNOOR-ALI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2019
TAGS: [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: BULGARIA AND THE GLOBAL MUSLIM ENGAGEMENT
INITIATIVE

REF: A. STATE 118190
[1](#)B. SOFIA 496

Classified By: CDA Susan Sutton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Post welcomes inclusion in the Global Muslim Engagement Initiative as outlined in ref A. We recommend tailoring post participation to fit Bulgaria's unique circumstances and look forward to working with S/P as suggested in reftel A to determine the most effective ways to proceed. Bulgaria's population of approximately 7.5 million is roughly 10 percent of Turkish origin. Many, but not all, of these citizens of Turkish descent are Muslim. About one-third of Bulgaria's Roma population (which makes up about four percent of the entire population) identify as Muslim. A small group of Pomaks -- descendants of ethnic Bulgarians who converted to Islam during Ottoman times -- also exists. Nevertheless, Bulgaria is a highly secular society. Members of Bulgaria's indigenous, mostly rural, Muslim population identify themselves first as ethnic Turks and Roma and by their Bulgarian citizenship rather than by religion. Although Bulgaria has maintained a reasonable degree of inter-ethnic harmony in recent years, there are still many sources of tension. One of the chief issues now is the role of the influential political party that is the main vehicle for Turkish and Roma political representation. Throughout its existence, there have been highly credible allegations that this party's leadership has used its political power to line its own pockets and create unfair advantages for party-affiliated companies (ref B). As a result, the entire party, along with the ethnic Turkish business interests associated with it, has become synonymous with corruption and its presence in the last coalition government was a key reason for the recent electoral defeat of all the parties in that coalition.

[1](#)2. (C) Given the secular nature of Bulgarian society, we have been careful to ensure our outreach is not explicitly targeted at Muslims (or any other religious group) as such an approach which would fall flat even within the Turkish and Roma communities. Given the sensitivities surrounding the unique influence and power of the ethnic-Turkish party in Bulgarian political life, we have also taken care to ensure that our outreach to the majority-Muslim Turkish population does not work at cross-purposes to post's strategic goal of fighting corruption, and is not done at the expense of outreach to other, more marginalized populations, especially Roma. We remain mindful of the need not to play into the hands of Bulgaria's small but vocal xenophobic ultra-right and set back the progress in promoting inter-ethnic relations that Bulgaria (and our outreach) has achieved so far. We believe the selection of Bulgarians based on religious affiliation to attend the prestigious Entrepreneurship Summit would not advance our interests here at this time.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Post ensures ethnic Roma and Turks (many of them Muslim) are well-represented in our International and Volunteer Visitor Programs and writer's programs and we

celebrate Bulgaria's diversity through the attendance of Iftars and the sponsoring of cultural events in and visits to predominately Turkish and Roma areas. An emphasis on entrepreneurship has always been central to our outreach strategy. Until our USAID presence ended in 2008 (after Bulgaria's 2007 EU accession), we focused on building entrepreneurship in disadvantaged communities through microfinance and other economic development programs.

¶4. (SBU) Additional steps we plan to take in response in reftel A include:

-- The meeting of an interagency working group on expanding economic opportunity for marginalized groups in disadvantaged areas. In this group we will develop strategies to improve job creation and entrepreneurship.

-- An increase in our travel to disadvantaged areas in the south of Bulgaria, including the visit of our new Ambassador to the region after his arrival. Through this travel we hope to identify Turkish and Roma entrepreneurs who may fit into future reftel A-related programming, and whom we may cultivate as partners.

-- Increased cultural and speaker programs for schools in Turkish and Roma areas (with a primarily Muslim population).

¶5. (SBU) We believe that these measures will allow us to support the goals of this initiative in ways that are appropriate to Bulgaria's specific situation, and consistent with post's long-term goals of promoting democratic development, respect for human rights, and rule of law.

SUTTON